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## CRITICAL NOTES

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### WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST THE SIGN OF JONAH?

The Dutch scholar Wilhelm Brandt suggested in 1893 (*Die Evangelische Geschichte*, p. 459, n. 2) that, by his famous allusion to the sign of Jonah, Jesus meant his predecessor John. In 1910 (*Die jüdischen Baptisten*, pp. 82-84) Brandt argued the point more at length. The idea was developed from Brandt's suggestion by Canon Cheyne, in his article "John the Baptist" in the *Encyclopedia Biblica* (II, col. 2502), and later by Alban Blakiston (*John the Baptist and His Relation to Jesus* [1912], pp. 220 f., n. 54). Independently and on different lines the same identification was argued by Professor B. W. Bacon (*The Sermon on the Mount* [1902], p. 232; *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate* [1910], p. 350; *Christianity Old and New* [1914], p. 160). Whether the suggestion was made prior to Brandt I have not been able to discover; it does not seem to be noticed in the commentaries, so far as I have examined them. It seems, however, to be of sufficient interest to warrant some attention.

The *logion* in question is found in Mark (8: 11 f.) and was apparently also in Q. Matthew has it twice (16: 1, 4, parallel to Mark, and 12: 38-42, paralleled by Luke 11: 29-32, doubtless from Q). The allusion to the sign of Jonah fails in Mark, but it is found in both the Q passages. The questioners who demand of Jesus a sign are "the Pharisees" in Mark, "Pharisees and Sadducees" in Matt., chap. 16, "some of the scribes and Pharisees" in Matt., chap. 12. In Luke the question fails altogether in this context, and the *logion* is delivered before a throng of indefinite ὄχλοι. The demand for a sign Luke gives in 11: 16, where the questioners are "others" of his critics, parallel to those who say, "By Beelzebub casteth he out devils." Clearly the original auditors are Pharisees, who demand some direct supernatural attestation of Jesus' claim to speak for God, such as was so often vouchsafed to the prophets of old, from Moses on. Jesus' reply rebukes the demand for such a sign as an evidence of faithlessness toward God, and roundly declares that none such will be forthcoming—save the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12: 39 adds "the prophet"). Quite obviously Jesus' works of healing and the like, which later Christians denominated "miracles," and used precisely

as signs divinely given to attest Jesus' supernatural status, did not have this value for his critics or for himself. "Miracles," in the dogmatic sense, he repudiates, and censures the reliance upon them as lack of faith, with a sure spiritual and psychological insight. But one sign, he declares, is vouchsafed to his generation, the sign of Jonah. What is meant?

It is obvious that he does not mean any miracle, in the traditional sense, specifically not the prodigious miracle of Jonah's adventure with the whale, of which Matthew, like most moderns, immediately thinks at the mention of Jonah's name. Without repeating the familiar discussion, we may assume that Jesus' meaning is essentially that set forth in Luke's comment (11:30): "For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also shall the Son of Man be to this generation." In other words, the prophet himself is the sign; specifically, the prophet as he preaches his message of repentance. The Ninevites shall condemn this generation in the judgment, for at Jonah's preaching they repented, whereas, despite the fact that something more than Jonah is here, this generation makes no response to this sign, and even contumaciously demands one of another sort. The general meaning is clear.

But the comment which parallels the Son of Man, i.e., Jesus, with Jonah is from the evangelist, not from Jesus himself, and it is not yet clear whether this identification corresponds to Jesus' own intention. Does he mean himself and his own work by something more significant than Jonah, something of greater wisdom than Solomon? The first evangelist's comment (Matt. 12:40) also identifies the sign with the Son of Man, or with something which happens to him; it might be held, therefore, that the comments of both Matthew and Luke rest upon an original saying in which this identification was made, and the common phrase "Son of Man" was used. But the complete divergence of the two comments renders this most unlikely; it is inevitable that any early Christian should suppose that the reference was to Jesus himself, and "the Son of Man" is Jesus' regular phrase for alluding to himself in the third person, as he must necessarily do here. We are, then, free to inquire: What prophet or prophetic activity is the sign of Jonah?

According to Brandt, Jesus would very naturally parallel John, who came crying to the people of Israel, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," with Jonah, who came to Nineveh with the cry, "Repent, for yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." Both men are distinctively prophets and preachers of repentance. Jesus has the most exalted opinion of John, and calls him, in another connection,

greater than all the prophets, yes, the greatest of all that have been born of women (Matt. 11:9-11, Luke 7:26-28). The appearance of so notable a figure in this generation ought surely to be significant, and set the people to thinking. That John was everywhere held to be a prophet (Mark 11:32), and that Jesus was explained as John come again, show that the Baptist could very properly be spoken of as a sign to this generation. Indeed, Jesus himself uses him as a sign, of a somewhat different sort, in Mark 9:12 f. (Matt. 17:12). Elijah came, and they did unto him even as they would; and how is it written of the Son of Man! And Brandt makes an interesting point in citing Jesus' figurative reference to John in Matt. 11:7 f. (Luke 7:24 f.). Was he a reed shaken by the wind (like the inconstant Jonah), or one clothed in elegant attire (like Solomon in all his glory, clothed in splendor, dwelling in a king's palace)? No, he was more than these; something more than Jonah, more than Solomon.

Bacon stresses the contrast of this utterance "with Jesus' invariable reserve regarding his own personality in public address," which would seem to indicate that he could not be referring to himself. Given the reference to John, how appropriate, Bacon goes on, is the parable of the House Swept and Garnished, which immediately follows in Matthew and almost immediately precedes in Luke, and so must have stood in this context in Q! Does not the parable mean that this generation, though it had seemed to be purged by John's activity, yet, because it did not receive God's spirit, brought by the preaching of Jesus, was falling a prey to spirits more evil than those which John had expelled?

It is a peculiarity of Bacon's view that he refers to John only the comparison with Jonah, that with Solomon being referred to Jesus himself, or, more specifically, to "the gracious call of God extended through Jesus to repentant sinners" (*Sermon on the Mount*, p. 235). Or, in other words, "The Baptist had come like Jonah to the Ninevites crying, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed.' His ministry was a sign from God to an unbelieving generation, but not the greatest sign. The works of mercy and grace, the glad tidings to the poor, forgiveness and restoration, the winning, gracious appeal of a divine Father's love, which constituted the ministry of Jesus, were 'a greater matter than Solomon,' a final plea of 'the Wisdom of God,' whose function is to seek out and save the erring" (*Christianity Old and New*, p. 160). I have quoted Bacon's own words here, as offering, to my mind, the most persuasive argument for the thesis in question. Cheyne, as usual, makes less appeal to conviction when he resorts to philological

arguments. He follows Brandt, but ascribes to Jesus an explanatory saying equivalent to Luke 11:30, with a play upon the names יִיְהוָה and יִיְהוֹנָן. "As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so shall also Johanan be to this generation." Blakiston repeats the points made by Brandt and Cheyne.

What shall we say of the argument? That it has at first sight something persuasive must at once be admitted, especially as set forth by Bacon. But closer examination seems to render it untenable, whether with Brandt, Cheyne, and Blakiston we apply both the sign of Jonah and the sign of Solomon to John, or whether with Bacon we apply the latter to Jesus. In regard to this point it seems clear that the parallel clauses have the same reference, ἰδοὺ πλεῖον Ἰωνᾶ ὤδε and ἰδοὺ πλεῖον Σολομῶνος ὤδε. One of these can hardly refer to the work of John, now dead and gone, the other to the work of the speaker, still in full course. And the whole context makes clear that we have here *one* sign, not two; the reference to the wisdom of Solomon is but a parallel, illustrative of the same figure just described in terms of Jonah. No sign shall be given save the single sign of Jonah, one prophetic personality with his summons to repentance. The entire context would be different if Jesus' response to his critics were an appeal to *two* signs, two prophetic personalities, one the antitype of Jonah, the other of Solomon.

Let us examine, then, the considerations offered for referring the sign of Jonah to John. Cheyne's play on names need not detain us. That John and Jonah are parallel as preachers of repentance, as prophets sent with a message from God, is of course true; but it is equally true that Jesus was the same. He too came with the cry, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15). His own prophetic consciousness is assuredly not less keen than his conviction that John is a prophet, and comes to frequent expression, as clearly distinguishable from his messianic consciousness. Or, rather, we cannot really speak of Jesus' messianic *consciousness* at all; he was never *conscious* of being Messiah, as in truth he was not Messiah, yet. He only believed himself called and appointed to the messiahship, which is a very different thing. But he was very distinctly and directly conscious of being a prophet, with a message of God to deliver. His first public words, according to Mark, imply this: "Repent, and believe in the gospel," the divine message of which I am the spokesman. It is true that he called John more than a prophet and the greatest of men. We could hardly expect him to add "except myself." He thought more

highly of John than any Christian since has done, yet we can see, from his own words, that his own prophetic consciousness rose above anything he said of John. It is indeed quite proper to speak of "his invariable reserve regarding his own personality in public address," which is too often overlooked, but it must not be pushed too far. Just before the passage we are considering, we read (Matt. 12:28-32): "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you. . . . He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth. Therefore I say unto you, Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven," etc. These are words spoken publicly to the Pharisees, and mean, if they mean anything, the consciousness of a prophet in whom the very Spirit of God dwelt and did its works. Or go back to the preceding chapter (11:20-24) and read how Jesus "began to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not. Woe unto thee, Chorazin; woe unto thee, Bethsaida. . . . And thou, Capernaum . . . thou shalt go down unto Hades: for if the mighty works had been done in Sodom which were done in thee, it would have remained unto this day." Here is a prophetic consciousness that finds an expression not less exalted than that which uses of itself the language, "the sign of Jonah, something more than Jonah, something more than Solomon." If we seek modesty here, we may find it in the neuter *πλειον*, which obviously designates, not Jesus in his own person, but what he signifies and brings to men. And in this passage, too, we see the cities upbraided because they repented not—at Jesus' preaching—precisely as a little later this generation is upbraided because it repented not at a preaching compared with that of Jonah. The parallel is very close. "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father. . . . Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me." Are these words not such as to furnish a background for the consciousness out of which the sign-of-Jonah utterance comes? Or these (10:32-42): "Every one who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven. . . . I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother. . . . He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. . . . He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me," etc. There is an abundance of such words, which go beyond the sign-of-Jonah passage in the intensity of prophetic con-

sciousness to which they give expression. To be sure, some of these sayings are doubtless spoken privately to the disciples; some are probably not spoken by Jesus at all, or not in just this wording. But we cannot draw our blue pencil through them all on the ground that Jesus cannot have so spoken, since we may know how he can have spoken only from our record of how he did speak. After all legitimate critical excision and discounting, there remains sufficient utterance of this kind to make it altogether plausible that Jesus said of himself, "No sign shall be given save the sign of Jonah; something more than Jonah, something more than Solomon, is here." If it is insisted that John, not Jesus, is the characteristic preacher of repentance, the synoptic data do not bear out the observation. *μετανοέω* is found once on the lips of the Baptist, eleven times on the lips of Jesus; the noun *μετάνοια* occurs in two sayings of John, in three of Jesus. This is not to minimize the prominence of this conception in John; it is only to show that Jesus also is a fit parallel to Jonah.

There remain the allusions to the reed shaken by the wind and to those who wear soft raiment (Matt. 11:7 f.; Luke 7:24 f.), which Brandt, Cheyne, and Blakiston take as suggesting Jonah and Solomon respectively. If this were so, the passage would necessarily have originally been part of the same utterance as the sign-of-Jonah context. So Brandt and Blakiston: the latter would attach Matt. 11:7-11 (Luke 7:24-28) to Matt. 12:39-42 (Luke 11:29-32). But there is no real warrant for such connection. Each passage has its own setting and its own distinct occasion. In the one case, as a sequel to the query of John's disciples, Jesus has said, "This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger," and, according to Matthew, at any rate, has gone on directly to declare, "He is Elijah, which was to come." It is hard to believe that in the same utterance Jesus would equate John with another prophet, Jonah; and the adding of Solomon to the list makes it even less credible. The other passage has an equally definite occasion in the demand of certain Pharisees for a sign, which circumstance conditions the wording of the saying. It is a simple comment on the demand for a sign. And if this passage preceded the other, it would be equally difficult to believe that Jesus would go on to say, "This is Elijah," and to quote the Malachi prophecy of Elijah's appearing, after he had begun by saying, "John is the sign of Jonah, that of which Jonah and Solomon were only imperfect types." It seems clear that the two passages in their occasions and contexts are different, and cannot be satisfactorily fitted together.

Moreover, are not the suggested applications a little far-fetched? *ἄνθρωπον ἐν μαλακοῖς ἱματίοις ἡμφιεσμένον* is surely intended to characterize a courtier rather than the king. Notice how the clause that follows, *οἱ τὰ μαλακὰ φοροῦντες ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις τῶν βασιλέων* (Luke, *οἱ ἐν ἱματισμῷ ἐνδόξῳ καὶ τρυφῇ ὑπάρχοντες ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις εἰσὶν*) is *plural*; quite certainly Jesus has here in mind the hangers-on about a royal court, who make life easy for themselves by subserviency to the ruler. The contrast of John's attitude toward Herod Antipas at once comes to mind. That the allusion is to the king, specifically to King Solomon, is in the highest degree improbable. Here the point made concerning the dweller in kings' houses is that he has every luxury of dress and food; the *sole* point mentioned concerning Solomon in the other passage is not in the least his luxury, but his wisdom. He is cited as a type of what is good, of the prophet of the new dispensation (whether John or Jesus). The man of soft raiment, on the contrary, is reprehended, cited as a type of what is scorned and held up as worthless. In truth the two passages have no connection one with the other.

Even more far-fetched seems the equation of Jonah with the reed shaken by the wind. It is not entirely clear what is actually implied by the figure of the reed, but, granting that it means instability and inconstancy, as most of the commentators assume, there is no reason to think specifically of Jonah, who was stubborn enough until he was driven by the irresistible divine Power to his task and even then had the hardihood to criticize the merciful dispensation of God to the repentant city. The connection here is in truth artificial and arbitrary, and fails to suggest any original relation of the two passages. The reed is spoken of with reproach; Jonah is mentioned, not in criticism, but in the loftiest terms of praise.

As for the parable of the House Swept and Garnished, it is reasoning in a circle to make it support the reference of "the sign" to John, for there are no independent grounds for making the parable itself refer to John. Only if it formed part of a context which clearly dealt with the Baptist would we have ground for finding in it some allusion to him; whether the present context is concerned with him is precisely the question at issue. The meaning of the parable is obscure; it is by no means certain that the impersonal phrase, "the unclean spirit, when he is gone out of the man," is an allusion to the cleansing of Jewish life supposedly wrought by John or by Jesus. The moment of driving out the demon, which would make the point of this comparison, is precisely the moment omitted in the parable. But even if Jesus were meaning to



contrast an earlier cleansing with a later relapse, the reference could as easily be to the following of his own initial success by an indifference which rapidly grew into the opposition which is the occasion of the very passages under discussion. Finally, even if the departure of the demon were a parabolic allusion to John's salutary influence, that fact would not make it the more likely that John was also meant by the sign of Jonah. The two things are not brought into sufficiently close connection to support each other.

In conclusion, two general considerations make against the proposed exegesis. The demand brought to Jesus is that *he* should show some sign that would serve as *his* legitimation: διδάσκαλε θέλομεν ἀπὸ σοῦ σημεῖον ἰδεῖν (Matt. 11:38); ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν σημεῖον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἐπιδείξαι αὐτοῖς (Matt. 16:1); ζητοῦντες παρ' αὐτοῦ σημεῖον ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (Mark 8:11); σημεῖον ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐζήτουν παρ' αὐτοῦ (Luke 11:16). The sign must come from him, or be something directly related to himself. Those who make John the sign of Jonah explain him as a sign to this generation of God's mercy, or God's wrath, or of the approaching end of this aeon, of the coming judgment, but not as a sign of Jesus, something that will show what he is and that God is with him. If Jesus replies, "I myself am the only sign you shall have," the connection is clear. If he says, "God gave you a sign in John the Baptist," he ignores the point of the Pharisees' demand, and speaks of something quite different. Proof is required that the preaching of Jesus is from heaven; the only proof is the preaching itself, says Jesus. However true it is to say that John the Baptist was a sign to his generation that the end of all things was at hand, it is quite meaningless for Jesus to point to him as a sign of the validity of his own message.

And, in the second place, it is not wholly without force that the earliest tradition, as it found expression in Q, clearly understood the reference to be to Jesus himself. If the saying had originally been part of the speech concerning the Baptist, as Brandt supposes, it would be difficult to account for the fact that in Q all memory of its original meaning is lost, and it is made a wholly distinct *logion*, with a setting and a context all its own. Both Matthew and Luke, though their source does not explicitly explain the reference, without a moment's hesitation identify the sign of Jonah with the Son of Man, their Master. Unless far more cogent evidence can be offered to the contrary than we have yet seen, we should make the same identification.

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